

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

ASHTON HALL

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide 94

Ashton Hall is one of Lancaster's Grade I listed buildings. It lies south-west of the city off the A588 road. It is less well known than Lancaster's other historic buildings because it has always been privately owned rather than a public building.

The Manor of Ashton was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. The first major building we know of on the site was a pele tower erected around 1381 by Edmund Laurence/Lawrence, a descendent of the de Lancastre family, the Barons of Kendal. Pele towers – many occur across northern England – were rectangular in plan, several storeys high and, with small windows, clearly designed with defence in mind.

The one at Ashton Hall, with its three storeys, four unusual towers in the corners, two-metre thick walls and battlements, has survived fairly intact externally but much altered internally over the centuries. The barrel-vaulting on the ground floor is impressive. Edmund's wife, Agnes de Washington from Co. Durham, was related to the Washington family members who moved to Northamptonshire, then Virginia and the Presidency of the United States.

The male line of the Lawrence family died out in the late fifteenth century and in time the Manor and Hall passed via a female line to the Gerard family. Sir Thomas Gerard, Queen Elizabeth I's Attorney General, became a baronet in 1611.There were Royal visits to the Hall in 1617 (James I and VI) and 1651 (the future Charles II).

The 5th Baronet's daughter Elizabeth was the Gerard family's heiress and when she married James the 4th Duke of Hamilton, Ashton Hall passed to the Dukes of Hamilton in 1698, one of the highest-ranking noble families. Elizabeth's husband died in 1712 in a duel and Elizabeth survived him by 32 years.

During the eighteenth century she made Ashton Hall a major force in British horse-racing, breeding thoroughbreds, training racehorses on a 1-mile, 6-furlong gallop on the estate, and supporting race meetings, notably the one in Lancaster through enhanced prize money. See Guide 78 in this series for more about Lancaster's race courses.



Ashton Hall, an engraving of the Hall in 1807
(Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collection, gratefully acknowledged)

The estate remained with the Dukes of Hamilton until 1853 when the 11th Duke auctioned it off. It was bought by Le Gendre Nicholas Starkie, the MP for Clitheroe and a member of an old Lancashire family.

James Williamson then bought the estate in 1884, taking the Ashton title when he was created Baron in 1895. Williamson could use the private station on the Glasson Branch line to get to Lancaster and beyond.

After he died, the estate was bought in 1931 by William Pye, a corn miller of Conder Green. He quickly leased it to the Lancaster Golf Club who were looking for a new site, the future of their course at Dolphinlee being uncertain.

The Hall now belongs to the Lancaster Golf Club, the parkland ideal for an 18-hole course.



Ashton Hall in its setting (Source: Ordnance Survey 6-inch map surveyed in 1844/45)

The original pele tower has survived over six centuries but other changes to the Hall have converted it from a fortified house to a grand residence that met newer standards and styles, and finally to suit the needs of a golf club and its golf course in the former deer park.

Successive owners have left their mark. The result is an architecturally complex building.

A wing was added around 1600 but has since been demolished. Major additions were made by the Duke of Hamilton around 1708, which were mostly demolished by Starkie in 1856. He favoured the then-fashionable neo-Gothic style which we see today.

The well wooded Deer Park acquired two lakes in the mid-eighteenth century and an ice-house in the nineteenth. The park's conversion to an 18-hole golf course in the early 1930s was to a design by James Braid, five times winner of the Open and a renowned golf-course architect.



Ashton Hall, front view c.1920s (Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collection, Sam Thompson photographer, gratefully acknowledged)



Ashton Hall, steps and doorway c.1920s (Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collection, Sam Thompson photographer, gratefully acknowledged)

Other Guides of interest in this series include:
35 Four Parks in Lancaster and Morecambe
78 Lancaster's Racecourses
55 The Ashton Memorial
98 The Friary and Dalton Square

Text – Gordon Clark
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